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Carmelo Pace (1906-1993): Homage to the first modernist Maltese composer of the 20th century

In the course of the research field in Maltese musical culture, this article offers homage to the first prominent 20th century composer, Carmelo Pace, whose output includes contributions to virtually every genre and runs to nearly 550 works.

Born to Maltese parents on 17 August 1906 in Valletta, Chevalier Maestro Carmelo Lorenzo Paolo Pace was the eldest of seven children.

After acquiring some fundamental training from his uncle Maestro Vincenzo Ciappara (1890-1979), Pace continued for a further nine years under foreign guidance. Pace studied violin under the tutelage of Antonio Genova, Professor Carlo Fiamingo and Dr Thomas Maine, grounding himself thoroughly in harmony, counterpoint, fugue, musical composition and orchestration. These wide-ranging studies allied to his innate talent, enabling Pace to blossom into a musical theorist who could deal confidently with the amazingly diverse forms and styles that were utilised in his compositions.

Pace's success in composition had taken him to be the first pioneering collector of Maltese folk music, a professional violist at the Royal Opera House, teacher and composer. Due to his extensive musical oeuvre, Pace managed to comprehend his musical aptitudes by exploring every aspect of stylistic genres, ranging from piano sonata to fully-fledged operas, choral, chamber and large-scale orchestral works. Although Pace wrote an extensive range of stylistic genres, his music remains almost completely unknown, most of this was never published or performed up to this day.

There appears to be no relevant documents, letters, correspondence or other existing evidence exhibiting any relevant connections with other foreign mainstream of his time which could support Pace's contribution towards the development of modernism in the first part of the 20th century. Due to this, there are various speculations that does not shed light on Pace's departure from the norm.

At the beginning of his musical career, Pace composed suites for piano, violin and violoncello, followed by cantatas, orchestral and chamber music, sacred hymns, two ballets, band marches, concertos and an opera-oratorio.

Through archival research, Pace's earliest works were recorded on Odeon Dischi Maltin, which were distributed by Paul Carabott. The works which include *Nghannu lil Cuiecheb* (Foxtrot), *Stediena ghas-sfin* (Tango), *Lucia* (Tango), *Ghajd lil mama* (One Step) and *Ghodua ta' imhabba* (Sentimental Waltz) are all written in old Maltese. These compositions were put to words by Pace himself and had three established singers: C. Aquilina (soprano), A. Theuma Castelletti (tenor) and Watty Cachia (baritone). Unfortunately, such works could not be found and are, as yet, untraceable.

Following his earliest attempts in the first three string quartets which constitute traditional harmonic idiom, a set of 11 string quartets (still un-premiered except for one) were later

conceived in the early decades of the 1930s, which convey the first implications of a modernist idiom in Malta.

Pace extended his chamber repertoire to large-scale orchestral works. The un-premiered Symphonic Overture *Simoisius in C minor* (1929) is a nine-minute, one-movement work which represents Pace's first attempts in the symphonic field. The form, style, orchestration and harmonic language echoes a typical 19th century work. Apart from his *Symphonie Dramatique* (1931) which reflects the early 20th century harmonic idiom, Pace wrote his *Symphony No. 2* (1966). Composed in three movements, the work does not retain that of the classical models as the title carries, but contains a continuous flow of musical ideas that are structured on improvisatory themes.

His anonymity is due to the fact that Pace never enhanced his studies abroad but progressed his technical harmonic skills through correspondence. Unfortunately, such correspondence that could provide significant information towards this intriguing harmonic expression could not be traced. Only a short congratulatory note which Dr Maine sent to Pace was found.

Pace commenced his private teaching at the reading room of the Bibliotheca in Valletta, which served as his classroom. His teaching quickly spread and his students rapidly increased in number, and thus, were considered to be the leading musical theorist where various talented students emerged to be well-established composers and conductors.

Among Pace's extended musical repertoire is the celebrated and most performed choral work *L-Imnarja* (1960), written for unaccompanied mixed voices (SATB). The composition is a lively choral work which depicts a day of village merry-making to celebrate the old feast of St Peter and St Paul.

In addition to the choral and vocal works, Pace composed four fully-fledged operas which are based on Maltese matter, either historical events that actually took place in Malta or adaptations of Maltese literature, so they continue the traditions of Romantic nationalism adopted by the late-Romantic composers. Pace's operas which include *Caterina Desguanez* – 1965; *I Martiri* – 1967; *Angelica* – 1973 and *Ipogea* – 1976 were all produced at the Manoel Theatre. Unlike some of Pace's predecessors, such as, Giuseppe Giorgio Pisani (1870-1929), Vincenzo Napoleone Mifsud (1807-1870) and Alessandro Curmi (1801-1857) they endeavoured to produce operas which were specifically performed in various countries namely the Zizinia Theatre in Alexandria, Egypt, the Apollo Theatre in Rome, the Teatro Nuovo in Naples and also at La Scala in Milan.

As Pace was considered an introvert, reclusive and sensitive person, working constantly in isolation, with no communication with the European mainstream, his obscurity in his musical career is reflected in his compositions. This research into this prolific Maltese composer has transpired that Pace's music is a language which is more personal and expressive than what is perceived on paper.

After dedicating his entire life to music and teaching, Pace suddenly fell ill with pneumonia, and died on 20 May 1993, leaving an array of unperformed works that are reliant on attention.